

Former Race Car Driver Turns Attention to Keeping You Safe on the Road

Lyn St. James, a veteran of the Indianapolis 500, wants to help families and young adults as they consider the purchase of a new car. After many years in racing, she has learned a great deal about safety. She knows that automobile safety is just as important on the highway as it is on the racetrack.

St. James suggests that by shopping carefully, families can often find a car with advanced safety features at an affordable price. According to Ms. St. James, the most important safety features are those installed by the manufacturer, such as air bags, four-wheel anti-lock brakes, stronger side-impact beams, and improved suspensions and tires.

“We recommend that parents with a fixed amount to spend for a used car shop around for as much safety as they can buy,” said St. James. “Some of the features that young people might want most, such as sophisticated stereo systems and CD players, can be purchased later as add-ons through electronics stores, auto parts centers, or car dealers.”

Ms. St. James offers the following tips on what safety features to look for in selecting a used car:

- ?? Air bags: Look for vehicles with at least a driver’s side air bag. Most safety experts agree that air bags provide an added safety advantage when used in conjunction with safety belts, particularly in front-end collisions.
- ?? Anti-lock brakes (ABS): Four-wheel anti-lock brakes help drivers avoid accidents if used properly.
- ?? Tires: Inspect all tires to make sure that there is at least one-eighth of an inch of tread depth for safety and to help prevent hydroplaning on wet roads. Look for any uneven tire wear, which may indicate improper wheel alignment or accident damage. Also, don’t forget to inspect for a workable spare tire and tire jack.
- ?? Adjustable seat belt anchors: This feature lets drivers adjust the position of the seat belt according to their height and size.
- ?? Suspension: Grasp the top of the tires and pull them in and out. Any free play or peculiar sounds at the front end may be a signal of worn suspension joints or worn wheel bearings.
- ?? Body alignment: A car that moves down the road off-center, or slightly sideways, may have been in an accident.
- ?? Body: Look for signs of accident repairs, such as paint that doesn’t match the rest of the car’s body. Tap body panels to ensure that the sound is consistent from panel to panel, but note that some lower body panels on newer models may be plastic, not steel, and would naturally sound different. On cars with all-steel body panels, a different sound could indicate that body fillers have been used to repair rust spots.

- ?? Steering: Grasp the steering wheel and turn it right and left with the engine off but the ignition on. Anything more than a couple inches of free play could indicate problems with the steering mechanism.
- ?? Transmission and clutch: The car should shift smoothly. Abrupt shifts with an automatic transmission could indicate excessive wear. On cars with a manual shift, slippage or even clutch engagement may indicate wear and expensive problems.
- ?? Shift-lock devices: On cars with an automatic transmission, look for a shift-lock device, which prevents the driver from shifting out of park without first depressing the brake pedal. This feature helps prevent the car from lurching forward if the driver accidentally hits the accelerator pedal instead of the brake when first starting the car.

Always Test-Drive

The best way to assess any used car is to take it for a test drive. Ms. St. James encourages parents to test the brakes, steering, and tires, at a minimum, for their performance. Any deviation from normal experience should be a signal to question the dealer or person selling the car about its integrity. If possible, take it to a trusted mechanic to thoroughly check out the car's safety and mechanical condition.

Note: Thank you to Jim Gill at Drive Safer America! in Auburn Hills, Michigan, for permission to use this article. Ms. St. James provides information about driving safety on the organization's Web site, www.drivesaferamerica.org.